

The Role of Social Media in Polarizing Canadians

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” — Margaret Mead

The Polarization Hypothesis

Social media platforms have come under sustained criticism for contributing to the polarization¹ of the mass public. The story goes that social media companies, in seeking to maximize the profitability of their services, have turned a blind eye to falsehoods, hate speech, harassment, and radicalization occurring on their platforms (e.g., Fisher 2022). Each of these online harms has chipped away at collective decency and undermined our ability to engage in reasoned political debate. As a population we are increasingly becoming unable to evaluate potential policy choices using underlying values and pragmatic concerns, and are instead thrust into a ‘post-truth’ era, where disagreement about simple factual claims is rampant (Farkas and Schou 2019).

The blame associated with this increased polarization, featured continually in popular and political discourse, is conspicuously inconsistent with a large and ever-growing body of scholarly research that casts doubt on the potency of social media to produce environments where groups of like-minded users frame and reinforce a shared narrative (so-called ‘echo chambers’, see Cinelli et al. 2022) and on the persuasive impact of social media platforms and information campaigns more generally. The scholarly literature finds that: a) users of social media platforms are generally exposed to a wide range of political arguments and information sources; and b) social media use and information campaigns more generally minimally impact attitudes and behaviours. So, which is it? Are social media platforms potent forces for polarization and extremism? Or are they a media choice that simply provide content that reflects a user’s prior ideas and has little impact on either individuals or society at large?²

This brief note aims to resolve these diverging views in the Canadian context. In doing so, I acknowledge the findings in the scholarly literature while still taking seriously the existential threat that social media platforms pose to social cohesion. The point of resolution between this views is interestingly hinted at in much of the scholarly literature. The majority of users of social media platforms may receive information from a variety of sources and experience minimal attitudinal and behavioural change. However, there is a subset of users that does get drawn into limited, biased, and self-reinforcing information environments and it is they who experience the strongest impacts of information campaigns and social media. I argue that social media platforms drive polarization among this group and the harmful dynamics need to impact only a (small) subsection of the population to radically change the discourse and alter the political trajectory of a polity.

This essay proceeds by evaluating the evidence for the radicalization and limited effects hypotheses before turning to the ways that the relatively small percentage of the population that is digitally polarized matters for Canadian politics.

1 Polarization can be said to be divided into ‘ideological’ and ‘affective’ dimensions. The story on the negative impacts of social media often focuses on the ‘affective’ side: the extent to which people like (or feel warmth towards) their political allies and dislike (or feel lack of warmth towards) their political opponents (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

² This essay necessary collapses a complex set of dynamics into two competing sets of ideas. Even a scholar with the most exacting preference for behavioural causal inference work is likely to admit, when pressed, that there are polarizing dynamics on social media and that we simply cannot effectively estimate them in a noisy and complicated information environment. One promising strategy away from this divide is presented by Törnberg (2022) who argues that social media drives polarization through dimensionality reduction with some supporting evidence for the dynamic from Bail et al. (2018).

Nothing to see here

In contrast to the popular narrative, scholarly research on polarization and online information environments generally underscores the complex relationship between user behaviours and algorithmic selection and provides significant evidence that the information environments afforded to users of social media platforms is diverse, thereby only minimally impacting attitudes and behaviours.

Although political interest is an antecedent of peoples’ news media exposure (Castro-Herrero, Nir, and Skovsgaard 2018) and individual users’ choices can play a role in limiting exposure to differential or diverse informational content (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015), a sizeable majority of the population does receive news and information from a wide range of sources (Arguedas et al. 2022). With seemingly unbridled access to news outlets and amplification of news content on online platforms, people can access, or at the very least, incidentally come across and consume information from a diverse range of news sources. In opposition to the ‘echo chamber’ hypothesis, research shows that social media platforms and search engines can increase users’ exposure to diverse information, with macro-level content diversity being influenced by factors such as ownership types and media systems regulation (Scharkow et al. 2020). News aggregators, for example, can benefit exposure diversity, and even platforms that provide algorithmically-driven information feeds like Twitter can have a positive short-term impact (Jürgens and Stark 2022). Similar findings are common in the scholarly literature, with exposure to a generally well-rounded online news ecosystem, commonly found amongst most users of online platforms, even when/if users claim to have staunch political views and believe that they are not exposed to a wide range of perspectives (a phenomenon scholars call “the diversity paradox”, see Joris et al. 2022). In the Canadian context, a study conducted in 2019 found that “partisan-congenial news exposure is uncommon, [and] only a trivial portion of Canadians can be considered to occupy an echo chamber in their news consumption habits” (Owen et al. 2020).

Even for the individuals who inhabit a narrow information environment, there is disagreement about the extent to which media consumption and persuasive campaigns shape public opinion and political behavior. The minimal/limited effects literature argues that individual characteristics, such as political knowledge, values, and prior attitudes, have a greater influence than the information environment (e.g. Bennett and Iyengar 2008). One of the most recently discussed of these information campaigns is the Russian Internet Research Agency’s alleged efforts to undermine U.S. democracy. A new study examining the Twitter dimension of the campaign estimated that there was no “support of a relationship between exposure to posts from Russian foreign influence accounts and changes in respondents’ issue positions or perceptions of polarization” (Eady et al. 2023).

There is nearly endless behavioural research showing how social media and specific informational

campaigns do not produce measurable attitudinal or behavioural change: fake news has ‘limited effects’ (A. Guess et al. 2020); there is “little evidence that the YouTube recommendation algorithm is driving attention” (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021); “neither non-algorithmic news nor either conception of algorithmic news we assess predict higher levels of partisan polarization” (Feezell, Wagner, and Conroy 2021). Compounding this general sense in the literature, the offline effects of online polarization tend to be difficult to track and understand – with the scholarly community generally finding minimal effects beyond general social/political distrust of people viewed as ideologically oppositional (A. Guess and Nyhan 2018). There is ample evidence that digital activity is associated with political participation (Boulianne 2020), however, studies linking information campaigns to similar participation measures consistently yield null results (e.g., Guess et al. 2021).

This torrent of behavioural and experimental work strongly points towards social media amplifying the visibility of polarized political conflict and affective polarization more generally, but not itself causing or even contributing to the existence of those dynamics.

Few but mighty

Thus, social media companies should be able to plausibly deny any culpability for increasing polarization and reduced social cohesion: ‘it is the users and not the platforms’. Reading the studies described above closely, however, gives cause for concern. The authors consistently observe that a small number of users who are indeed found to occupy narrow information environments experience increased (affective) polarization. They are “only a subset” (Guess et al. 2018), “a small segment of the population” (Dubois and Blank 2018), “small compared with centrist, left-leaning, or right-leaning communities “ (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021), and even “a trivial portion” (Owen et al. 2020). Estimates vary depending on the study, but between 5-10% of people in online spaces are said to occupy ‘echo chambers’ (e.g., Arguedas et al. 2022) and/or be subject to an increase in (largely algorithmically-caused) polarization.

There is strong evidence to suggest that, under certain conditions, social media can matter. Many experiments conducted in communications and political science make things clear: “social media can further affectively polarize people” (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021). An increasingly common form of content on social media – the mocking of political opponents and arguments – has been particularly strongly associated with affective polarization (Suhay, Bello-Pardo, and Maurer 2018). This derogation of political difference helps build community while insulating and reinforcing existing political commitments (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022). These deleterious dynamics have been exhaustively documented by journalists, concerned family members (e.g., r/QAnonCasualties), and some scholars (e.g., Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022).

So, if these dynamics are not universal but do seem to be relevant for 5-10% of the population, the obvious question is: does this portion of the population matter? There are at least two reasons to believe that deeply polarizing and even radicalizing a small amount of the population can have large down-stream effects.

First, these individuals tend to be the ones who end up driving a large amount of the online conversation. We know that those who are the most active online produce a vastly disproportionate amount of the content consumed (Abrahams and Lin 2022). In a study examining digital activists in Canada, I found that 10% of the population produced approximately 80% of the Canadian politics related content on Twitter during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election (Bridgman 2022).

I found this 10% to be categorically different from the average Canadian along several important axes, including stronger political conviction and much higher levels of affective polarization. Other researchers have found similar inequalities of consumption and production of polarization content. For example, one study found that 10% of users accounted for 98% of exposures to the Russian Internet Agency during the 2016 U.S. Election (Eady et al. 2023). Another experiment conducted by Reddit removed approximately 15,000 hyperactive producers of hate speech on the platform and found a drop of 80% of hate speech overall (Fisher 2022, 327). These studies do not causally identify the use of digital spaces and polarization or radicalization, but the co-occurrence of considerable digital participation and extreme political attitudes is nevertheless notable. The content that the most active individuals produce reflects these convictions and animosities and helps set the tone for the broader political conversation.

Second, these individuals are far more likely to engage in embodied and directed political participation acts, including protests and blockades, producing hate and harassing speech, and voting in crucial low-turnout contests (e.g., riding nominations, party leadership contests) which matter for selecting political leaders who set the Overton window – the set of policies politically acceptable to the mass population. The blockades associated with the ‘Freedom Convoy’ in 2022 were organized and implemented by a small number of individuals. For example, just 47 people were arrested for blockading the Ambassador Bridge which carries approximately 25% of all merchandise trade between the United States and Canada (Lawder 2022). Estimates vary, but fewer than 20,000 Canadians descended on Ottawa during the Convoy and ground its downtown to a halt for weeks.

The online hate directed at politicians, journalists, practitioners, and academics can have dramatic chilling effects, again with just a small number of individuals able to have a marked impact (Tenove and Tworek 2019; 2022). The actions of a few are no less important when considering the selection of political leadership. The Liberal race in 2013 saw just over 100,000 Canadians (representing less than 1% of eligible voters) choose the individual who would then go to be Prime Minister and chart the policy course of the country for eight plus years. In the recent Conservative Party Leadership Race, a record 400,000 Canadians (representing still only about 2% of Canadians eligible to cast a ballot in a federal election) voted. A group of polarized Canadians with deep convictions, driven to their attitudes and animosities in part by social media can seize upon key political moments and opportunities to drastically impact the nature and outcomes of the political conversation.

Conclusion

Much of the polarization debate misses the trees for the forest. It can be simultaneously true that Canadians are generally not living in information bubbles, being radicalized by social media, and being convinced by disinformation campaigns; AND a sizeable population of Canadians are. This second population is regularly dismissed as of secondary importance. However, from the perspective of the public and of policymakers, a small but extremely vocal and active minority of deeply polarized Canadians do pose an enormous risk to good governance. They shape the conversation and make the discourse appear to be more divided and hostile than it otherwise would be. They marginalize and harass perspectives and groups they disagree with. They elect more extreme political leaders who then drive more extreme politics.

The reality is that those who live in echo chambers and are increasingly radicalized in social

media spaces are the loudest and most energetic force in Canadian politics today. When social media is said to radicalize, we should stop hand waving this away by saying “not most Canadians” and begin to take seriously the damage these platforms are doing to our democracy writ large.

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